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14. ABSTRACT

For nearly the past three decades, Afghanistan has been in a state of perpetual conflict. One constant throughout this period has been the presence of hundreds of non-state actors with militias of varying sizes and abilities. These so-called "warlords" have been in the midst of this conflict and today possess significant influence across the country. Following the defeat of the Taliban in 2002, these armed militias constituted a significant force, and Japan was designated the lead for the process designed to deal with the warlords: disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). Under this program, warlords were required to report to any one of a variety of collection stations to turn-in their weapons and demobilize their forces. Despite the completion of DDR over two years ago, many armed militias still remain in Afghanistan and, under the leadership of various warlords, wield significant influence in a variety of ways, usually outside the sphere of influence of the Afghan government or its security forces. This paper addresses the role that coalition forces have with regard to warlordism and tests the thesis that coalition forces should develop and implement a new approach toward warlordism. Specifically, it examines the failure of DDR to achieve its stated objectives and proposes three possible approaches that might be applied in an effort to resolve the challenge of warlordism. Finally, the paper draws conclusions based on this analysis and offers recommendations for how operational-level leaders in Afghanistan might deal with this problem.

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AFGHANISTAN: MOVING BEYOND WARLORDISM

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan: Moving Beyond Warlordism

For nearly the past three decades, Afghanistan has been in a state of perpetual conflict. One constant throughout this period has been the presence of hundreds of non-state actors with militias of varying sizes and abilities. These so-called "warlords" have been in the midst of this conflict and today possess significant influence across the country. Following the defeat of the Taliban in 2002, these armed militias constituted a significant force, and Japan was designated the lead for the process designed to deal with the warlords: disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). Under this program, warlords were required to report to any one of a variety of collection stations to turn-in their weapons and demobilize their forces. Despite the completion of DDR over two years ago, many armed militias still remain in Afghanistan and, under the leadership of various warlords, wield significant influence in a variety of ways, usually outside the sphere of influence of the Afghan government or its security forces. This paper addresses the role that coalition forces have with regard to warlordism and tests the thesis that coalition forces should develop and implement a new approach toward warlordism. Specifically, it examines the failure of DDR to achieve its stated objectives and proposes three possible approaches that might be applied in an effort to resolve the challenge of warlordism. Finally, the paper draws conclusions based on this analysis and offers recommendations for how operational-level leaders in Afghanistan might deal with this problem.

INTRODUCTION

For nearly the past three decades, Afghanistan has been in a state of perpetual conflict. One constant throughout this period has been the presence of hundreds of non-state actors with militias of varying sizes and abilities. These so-called "warlords" have been in the midst of this conflict and today possess significant influence across the country.[1] Following the defeat of the Taliban in 2002, these armed militias--known then as Afghan Military Forces (AMF)--constituted a significant force, reasonably well-armed and trained. In December 2001 in Bonn, Germany, a collection of nations met with representatives of Afghanistan's various warring factions and competing interest groups to develop the structure for a new government designed to resolve the various challenges confronting the fractured state.[2] The result of this conference, now known as the "Bonn Agreement," was the establishment of the framework for a constitution modeled after the country's 1964 Constitution--a document perceived by the attendees at the conference to be legitimate in the eyes of most Afghans.[3] Another of the conference's products was the designation of lead nations for various aspects of Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, and Japan was designated the lead for the process that came to be known as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). Executed under the construct of a United Nations (UN) program called the Afghan New Beginnings Program (ANBP), DDR was implemented in 2003 and concluded by July 2006.[4] Under this program, the AMF were required to report to any one of a variety of collection stations to turn-in their weapons and demobilize their forces. Despite the completion of DDR over two years ago, many armed militias still remain in Afghanistan and, under the leadership of various warlords, wield significant influence in a variety of ways--usually outside the sphere of influence of the Afghan government or its security forces. This paper will address

the role that coalition forces have with regard to warlordism and will test the thesis that coalition forces should develop and implement a new approach toward warlordism.

To support this thesis, the author will present a brief overview of the warlordism in the historical context of recent conflict in Afghanistan. The paper will then examine the failure of DDR to achieve its stated objectives and will propose three possible approaches that might be applied in an effort to resolve the challenge of warlordism. Finally, the paper will draw conclusions based on this analysis and will offer recommendations for how operational-level leaders in Afghanistan might deal with this problem.

BACKGROUND

Warlordism Defined

Defined by NATO as someone who heads an "ethno-regional militarized patronage network,"[5] warlords derive their power through a parallel economy centered on illegal trade in drugs, gemstones, timber, arms and by imposing tariffs and fees through a variety of means. Although the moniker "warlord" is commonly used by international media to refer to these leaders, it is a somewhat inappropriate label to describe these individuals as warlords, because their characteristics vary widely across the country. As is often the case, the term warlord does not translate cleanly into Dari, the official language in Afghanistan. The Dari term commonly used to describe those warlords who led their militias against the Soviets, and later against the Taliban, is "commander." However, a new term, *jang salar,* has recently emerged as a label for the warlords and carries with it a negative connotation.[6] In a 2007 study published by the journal *International Politics and Security,* Conrad Schetter argues that the label warlord is misleading because it is typically used to describe a "wide variety of

actors who seldom have much in common."[7] Schetter further describes how the term has been used arbitrarily by Afghans to stereotype certain warlords and portray them in either a positive or negative light, depending on a particular Afghan's motivation.[8] Schetter posits that there are two common misperceptions regarding warlords: the notion that they are opposed to the Afghan government, and the popular perception that they are modern-day robber barons.[9] Neither of these concepts is accurate in that they attempt to label the warlords without regard for the complexities of the socio-economic context in which they operate.[10]

Sources of Warlordism

A study of Afghanistan's conflict against the Soviets in the 1980s reveals the existence of several regional leaders who led their *mujahideen* in opposition to the Russian occupation (often with U.S. support via the CIA)--men such as Jalaluddin Haqqani, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Ismail Khan, to name a few.[11] In response to the ascendancy of the Taliban, which emerged to fill the vacuum created by the departure of the Soviets, these same men were instrumental in assisting the United States ultimately to oppose and defeat the Taliban. In the 1980s and in the period following the 9/11 attacks, the United States invested heavily in an effort to equip, arm and train a variety of AMF groups.[12] To a degree, we are victims of our own success, since the warlords we now seek to disarm and demobilize are the very ones we worked to arm and enable over the past two decades. While there is no one warlord who typifies their ilk, the story of Abdullah Mujahid is typical and is one that has been repeated throughout the country, in various forms. In 2001 and 2002, the United States, who at the time had only small numbers of troops on the ground in Afghanistan, enlisted the support of Mujahid, and many other like him, in order to fight the Taliban.[13] Mujahid was a local strongman whose followers dominated Gardez, a medium-sized town in Afghanistan's

mountainous east. Following the defeat of the Taliban, Mujahid filled the power vacuum that resulted as the Taliban fled and became the town's Chief of Police.[14] As Chief of Police, Mujahid proved to be a poor public servant, and residents quickly came to resent his abuse of his position for personal gain. According to a Human Rights Watch report, militia members loyal to Mujahid were responsible for extortion of taxi, truck and bus drivers in Gardez.[15] At the same time, Mujahid occasionally cooperated with U.S. forces and even met with General Dan K. McNeill, then the coalition force commander in Afghanistan. Over time, however, Mujahid's relationship with U.S. forces deteriorated and by 2003 his men were believed to be responsible for launching rockets at the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) base at Gardez and for the ambush of a U.S. patrol at a police checkpoint in the city.[16] Mujahid was subsequently detained and sent to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Warlords and the Opium Trade

Opium production in Afghanistan has skyrocketed since 2001. By 2007, Afghan opium production accounted for 92 percent of the world's total.[17] Although it is unfair to link all warlords to the opium trade, many of them derive their livelihood through trade of illicit drugs. In some cases, several warlords are also prominent drug kingpins.[18] A typical relationship is one in which a warlord bribes officials in the Afghan government in exchange for protection for poppy farmers and drug traffickers who operate within that warlord's sphere of influence.[19] Aside from the nefarious actions of the warlords in this arrangement, this opportunity serves as a temptation for the Afghan civil servant and leads to corruption at all levels of the government. According to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, "drugs in Afghanistan are threatening the very existence of the Afghan State."[20]

DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

The UN-sponsored program for dealing with men such as Mujahid, DDR, required three and a half years to implement and concluded in July 2006 after the expenditure of over $141 million, the bulk of which was provided by Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Netherlands.[21] On the surface, the results of this effort are impressive. The program resulted in the decommissioning of 259 AMF units, to include the demobilization of 63,380 ex-combatants.[22] According to the UN, of these, 55,804 were successfully reintegrated into one of several options for employment to include: agriculture, vocational training and job placement, demining, teaching or enlistment in the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).[23] Curiously, when the Japanese-led DDR program was developed in early 2003, the ANBP established a goal of demobilizing 100,000 militia through the process.[24] This number, however, was arbitrary, because the total number of AMF is difficult to judge due to the warlords' habit of masking their troop strength by paying their militia members with profits derived from the opium trade.[25] In fact, other sources estimate the size of the AMF from 60,000 to 250,000.[26] Another tactic used by the warlords to side skirt DDR was their method of turning in only obsolete or non-functioning weapons, while keeping the modern, functional arms for themselves.[27] A fundamental weakness of the program was that it did not account for two categories of AMF--those employed by coalition forces or the Afghan government and informal militias who operated autonomously and were not subject to the Afghan government's oversight.[28] While it did make commendable progress, DDR clearly did not fulfill the purpose envisioned during the Bonn Conference in 2001. Hundreds of warlords still remain in power in Afghanistan, and in many cases have

established a "parallel economy" that operates outside of government oversight and relies on a steady and increasing supply of funds from the lucrative opium trade.[29]

So, one of the primary questions that the framers of the Bonn Agreement wrestled with in 2001 still remains--what to do about the warlords? In 2004, Afghan president Karzai declared that he saw warlords as Afghanistan's most serious problem and that if re-elected, he would take action to reduce their power.[30] Despite these intentions, neither the Afghan government nor coalition forces have implemented any sort of new program targeting the warlords. At the Bonn Conference, two primary arguments were voiced as means of dealing with the problem: either they should be co-opted to work within the framework of the Afghan government, or they should be eliminated. This paper will explore three possible approaches toward dealing with warlordism: a new form of DDR, co-opting the warlords, or eliminating them.

DDR Redux

The DDR program was led by Japan, a nation that had very little presence on the ground when the program was implemented. Clearly, this arrangement was sub-optimal and obligated the Japanese government to commit millions of dollars without requiring them to physically oversee the implementation of the program. Now that the Afghan government is expanding its reach to the populated areas and the ANSF have grown substantially in strength, perhaps an Afghan government form of DDR could succeed in accomplishing the ANBP's original goals, and do so using the Afghan Army as the implementing organization. This would require an honest critique of the original DDR and the ability of the Afghans to apply lessons learned so that a new DDR could avoid the pitfalls that doomed the original program. In Iraq, coalition forces have found at least initial success in hiring large numbers of former

insurgents as security guards and then transferring these men to the Iraqi Security Forces. Perhaps a similar approach would work with the warlords' militias because it would offer an alternative means of livelihood that does not currently exist. According to an observer at the Bonn Conference, "the warlords need to see a way out. If they are painted into a corner and their choice is between a cell at The Hague and continued warlordism, they are going to choose warlordism."[31]

Co-opting the Warlords

The notion of co-opting the warlords by placing them in various government positions is not new and is something that the Afghan government leadership has done, with varying degrees of success in recent years. At the 2002 Loya Jirga (grand council), President Karzai publicly welcomed the warlords and encouraged them to take part in the political process.[32] The obvious downside of giving the warlords government jobs is the potential of causing further corruption in the government. Perhaps the best known example of this potential for abuse was the appointment of Ismail Khan as governor of Herat province. Khan was subsequently dismissed from this position by President Karzai in consideration of Khan's continued practice of torture, beatings and harassment.[33] Karzai's decision to dismiss Khan, while politically risky, is encouraging and suggests at least an attempt at accountability by the central government. The fact is, however, that Khan, although he is no longer governor, remains a very powerful person in his region.

Another variation on this theme is the approach that the British have taken with Mullah Salaam, a former Taliban commander who wields significant influence in Helmand province. Dissatisfied with the Taliban, Salaam decided to opt out of Taliban plans to attack coalition forces in Helmand province.[34] Shortly thereafter, while in Kabul, Salaam was

approached by an Irish diplomat, Michael Semple, with a suggestion that Salaam lead, with British backing, a tribal uprising against the Taliban.[35] In fact, in a meeting with the head of the British Military Stabilization Team in the region, Salaam articulated his position as being strongly anti-Taliban and anti-narcotics.[36] Although Salaam may help coalition forces to defeat the Taliban, this partnership does not necessarily resolve the fact that Salaam is a warlord and operates outside the realm of legitimate governance. By supporting Salaam, coalition forces could unintentionally make the same mistakes U.S. forces made in 2001 and 2002--supporting warlordism without any sort of plan for bringing the warlords into the legitimate governmental process. In fact, a British officer in the region summed up this risk, "He (Salaam) is a compelling individual. But we still don't know what his ulterior motives are."[37]

Missing in this approach is a method for dealing with the militias loyal to a particular warlord. It is not enough simply to legitimize a warlord if his militia remains loyal to him. Since DDR has been completed, there is no state-sponsored program for bringing ex-militiamen into the workforce in some sort of legitimate capacity.

Eliminating the Warlords

This approach is based on the principle that warlords must be eliminated because they have no place in the government process and do not exist in the government framework, and that appointing them to a government job would undercut the legitimately-elected provincial governors.[38] A participant in the Bonn Conference offered that the peace process must seek to eliminate the warlords because the long-term cost of financing and working with warlords, who are not accountable to the government, is high.[39] While in the short term it might be

expedient to work through the warlords, it would create a dependency relationship and result in the perception of legitimizing them.

One of the fundamental principles of counterinsurgency operations is that the government must be seen as legitimate. By its very existence, warlordism undermines the government. In order to be perceived as legitimate, the government must have the ability to provide for the most basic needs of the population, especially security and essential services. Current U.S. military doctrine defines an insurgency as "an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict."[40] Warlords do not fit the definition of an insurgency because they generally do not seek to overthrow the government; they simply desire to maintain their power base and the influence that derives from that power. In fact, it is precisely the absence of a state that allows the warlords to function. As such, they occupy a sort of no-man's land--a bridge between anarchy and legitimate governance. Nevertheless, it may be useful to think of the warlords as an insurgency.[41] As in an insurgency, some warlords provide for their constituents services that the government does not, or cannot, provide. In the event that a warlord fails to provide that which the population expects, the population becomes dissatisfied. Recently, there are indications that some warlords' power bases may be eroding. In early 2008, Jan Alekozai, a journalist for *Radio Free Europe,* travelled to Afghanistan and spent several weeks in Kabul and eastern Afghanistan. While there, Alekozai spoke to students, tribal leaders and local officials who expressed their concerns regarding the current situation in the country.[42] Alekozai summed up the gist of the comments he heard in a report on 13 April 2008: "People think now that troops from 37 countries are in Afghanistan they should terminate the warlordism and the private militias. People want the international community to stop the

private militias. That's the main concern of the people. People are scared. They cannot say anything because of the warlords."[43] Adding to the public's displeasure with the warlords is the fact that many of them have developed systems that allow them to siphon off the foreign aid that has been spent for reconstruction.[44] This sort of public opposition or displeasure presents an opportunity that the Afghan government might exploit. In a counterinsurgency operation, the legitimate government seeks to drive a wedge between the insurgents and their base of popular support. Through the use of an effective information operations campaign, the Afghan government can expose this sort of corruption while promoting the legitimate forms of local government that seek to stop these corrupt practices. If the warlords are increasingly seen as illegitimate in the eyes of the population, there is an opportunity for the government, particularly the ANSF, to provide a solution to the problem, thus isolating the population from the warlords' influence.

One of the paradoxes of counterinsurgency operations is that the more force that is used, the less effective that force is. Therefore, confronting the warlords directly, in an attempt to defeat them militarily would serve only to strengthen their cause. An attack on a militia group could result in a backlash that extremist groups could exploit in order to feed the propaganda machine of Al Qaeda or the Taliban.[45] So, assuming that the principles of fighting an insurgency apply to the warlords, an effective counter-warlord strategy would be one that sought to undermine the warlords' basis of support. Just what form such a strategy would take is beyond the scope of this paper, but would rely more on non-kinetic means than attacking the warlords directly, through the use of military force.

CONCLUSIONS

DDR has clearly failed to achieve the objectives as outlined by the ANBP. Strangely, in the summer of 2006, the UN declared DDR complete and published a glowing report touting the success of the program. The title of this UN report reveals the gap between the UN's characterization of its success and the reality on the ground: "DDR: Reintegration has been completed in time and within costs."[46] Despite the obvious failure of DDR, coalition strategy has not substantially changed with regard to warlordism.

This paper sought to analyze three different approaches to the issue of warlordism in Afghanistan. Without question, warlordism is one of the most intractable challenges facing the new government of Afghanistan. In truth, elements of the three approaches have been applied to the problem.

The first alternative this paper explored was the notion of a second round of DDR, implemented by the Afghan government, instead of an outside nation. To the credit of the ANBP, DDR was a nation-wide program and represented a holistic approach to solving the problem of warlordism. It sought to address all warlords and their associated ex-combatants and included a method for re-integrating those ex-combatants into society, either as members of the ANSF, the public sector or into state-sponsored private enterprises. While DDR did successfully address some of the AMF, it did not effectively disarm or reintegrate the large numbers of AMF who were "off the books" and funded through back-channel means by various warlords. There would be two significant advantages to a second round of DDR. First, it could serve to legitimize and strengthen the Afghan National Army (ANA), an important achievement in the evolution of the ANA toward a force capable of providing security and stability within the country. Second, it could provide an alternative means of

livelihood for those who currently serve a warlord. With the ANA struggling to fill its ranks, with a current end-strength of only 70,000, the militias could provide a needed source of manpower.

The second alternative considered is the idea of co-opting the warlords. As previously mentioned, the government has taken this approach with some of the warlords, nearly since the government's inception. As the case of Mullah Salaam illustrates, this approach can be a powerful one, and is an effective means of expanding the Afghan government's influence, given the paucity of ANSF in certain areas. However, this method carries with it two significant risks. The first is that it deals with the warlord only, and does not necessarily account for the disarmament and reintegration of the militias loyal to a particular warlord. Second, it has the potential of furthering the culture of warlordism. The idea of co-opting the warlords to fight the Taliban is somewhat short-sighted and is precisely the approach that created and enabled many of the warlords we now seek to disarm. The old adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" is compelling, and given the current security situation in Afghanistan, this approach may work, as long as we do so with some sort of forethought to the status of the warlords when our common enemy, in this case the Taliban, is defeated.

Finally, this paper considered a policy of eliminating the warlords altogether. Warlordism stands in stark contrast to a functioning and legitimate Afghan government. Ultimately, the two cannot co-exist. That Afghanistan must cope with the problem of the warlords is essential if the country is to have a chance at sustainable security and economic development. However, by attacking the warlords and their followers directly, the Afghan government runs the risk of pushing the population closer to the warlords, and further away from the Afghan government. In terms of a new strategy for the problem, it is worth

considering the warlords as an insurgency, and then crafting a counter-warlord strategy that seeks to end warlordism indirectly, by attacking the root causes of warlordism. What we want to do is eliminate the "culture" of warlordism, not necessarily warlords themselves

RECOMMENDATIONS

Eliminate the Term Warlord

Despite the limited scope of this paper, it is clear that warlordism is a notion that is exceedingly difficult to characterize. The presence of so many different forms of warlordism, ranging from violent extremist groups to semi-legitimate strongmen currently working along-side coalition and Afghan forces, underscores the inappropriateness of this term. The Afghan government and coalition force leadership should abandon the use of the term warlord altogether. Continuing to apply this label, whether it fits or not, has unintended consequences that undermine the Afghan government's efforts. As has been demonstrated, the term can be used to legitimize violent extremist organizations and also to denigrate a leader who might otherwise become a constructive part of the political process. At the Bonn Conference in 2001, in reference to the warlords, one of the participants observed, "For the last 20 years, everybody who was exercising power was a war criminal in one way or the other, because there wasn't any other way to exercise power."[47] While the term warlord might have had some utility in 2001, at some point, we must choose to reject a term that is increasingly inappropriate given the complex situation we now face. The fact that Afghans themselves now use two different terms to distinguish between warlords who serve as leaders versus those seen as criminals, suggests that it is time for coalition forces to follow suit. As we attempt to separate the reconcilables from the irreconcilables, it is unhelpful for us to limit

ourselves to a single term that unfairly characterizes those whose assistance and cooperation we need.

A New Campaign Plan

None of the three solutions examined in this paper is an obvious solution to the problem of warlordism. Aside from attacking the warlords directly, each of the three proposals contains elements that are compelling, but any solution carries with it associated pitfalls. What is needed is a new strategy that addresses resolving the problem of warlordism directly. If the Afghan government and coalition force leadership agree that the objectives of the DDR program were sound, it follows then that if the program has failed to achieve its stated objectives, we must find some other means of achieving these objectives. At the operational level, strategy is expressed in the form of a campaign plan. Any sort of campaign plan coalition forces develop must include the goals of DDR, as originally articulated by the ANBP. Whether the Afghan government attempts a second round of DDR or not, these goals must be articulated as specific achievable objectives. This may sound obvious, but articulation of these objectives is important if the objectives are to be translated into tasks at the tactical level.

Coalition forces in Afghanistan represent several different nations and fall under a NATO command and control structure. Therefore, inclusion of an approach to warlordism in the campaign plan is essential in ensuring unity of effort among the different nations operating in Afghanistan. Failure to do so leaves the door open to varying interpretations of the ultimate goals with regard to warlordism and does not provide a mechanism for ensuring that those goals are achieved.

Learning from the Past

Our new approach to warlordism should attempt to incorporate lessons learned since we first addressed the problem in 2001. An examination of these lessons reveals a few enduring principles that must be part of any strategy regarding the warlords. Clearly, an approach to warlordism must be a comprehensive one that addresses not only the warlords themselves, but their militias as well. The idea of co-opting certain warlords is worth exploring, as long as we think through how to accommodate the militias. One of the shortfalls in our approach to warlordism to-date is the inability of the government to offer any sort of reasonable alternative to the ex-combatants who follow the warlords. The existence of the lucrative drug trade further complicates the Afghan government's ability to induce Afghans to work for relatively low wages for the government. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the fact that the opium trade is inextricably tied to the warlords' livelihoods indicates that any strategy for dealing with the warlords cannot ignore the importance of the opium trade in the parallel economy the warlords control. Further, the fact that warlords comprise a diverse set of characters, whose motivations and allegiances vary greatly, suggests that any successful approach to warlordism will vary greatly from province to province. Commanders (both Afghan and coalition) must have the latitude to craft a solution that is appropriate to their specific circumstances. This further underscores the requirement that objectives regarding the warlords be specified in our campaign plan, and then articulated as appropriate to the regional commanders.

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